

OPENING UP THE VAULT

by Wayne Stellmach



The definition of a concrete burial vault according to the performance standards of the National Concrete Burial Vault Association (NCBVA) is:

A lined and sealed burial receptacle which performs all the functions of the concrete graveliner, and in addition is designed and constructed using one or more lining and sealing materials to increase the overall tensile strength of the finished unit and to reduce the risk of the intrusion of exterior elements.

A graveliner is defined as:

A burial receptacle placed in the ground in a cemetery, either sectional, dome or box form designed and built to support the weight of the earth and standard cemetery maintenance equipment and to prevent the grave from collapsing.

The key difference is protection of the contents. Both prevent the grave from collapsing but a concrete burial vault is lined and sealed against the intrusion of natural ground elements such as water, insects and earth. A graveliner provides no such protection.

This distinction is critical, and critically important, because arguably most families do not understand the difference yet many families indeed place value on protection of their loved one.

One research study conducted in late 2013 asked consumers if there was a difference between a burial vault and a gravebox (graveliner). Seventy-eight percent said they did not know the difference. But when those same consumers simply watched a video that explained outer burial containers (OBCs) and the distinguishing attributes of a burial vault, fifty-seven percent said they would choose a burial vault. This was based on a two-minute video with no additional support of literature, samples, pricing or guidance from a funeral professional. Another twenty-six percent wanted additional information before they would choose. But quite

interestingly, only seventeen percent said that they would choose a gravebox, which is far off of the estimated fifty percent unlined OBC sales in today's market.

The key takeaways from this particular study are:

- (1) The majority of families do not know the difference between graveliners and burial vaults.
- (2) Families want information, particularly on something they admit they don't know much about.
- (3) A majority of families prefer burial vaults over unlined graveboxes once they are informed about its protective properties.

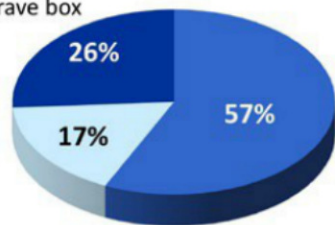
This study also indicates opportunity for funeral professionals: opportunity to evaluate whether staff is taking sufficient time to present OBC information to families; opportunity to consider updated video and other tools that are available to help present that information; opportunity to improve their OBC sales mix simply by informing.

Sadly, it seems that those who value the protection of their buried loved ones are the silent majority, as negative or skeptical viewpoints tend to get more

attention in today's media, whether social or traditional. But occasionally, stories do emerge of families who very much value the protection rendered by a burial vault. A few years ago a television station in Roanoke, VA did a series on the use of graveliners for no-cost veterans' burials, reporting that people were quite upset when realizing their loved ones were not buried in sealed vaults. A veteran's widow was extremely distraught when she learned, after her husband's burial, that the graveliner would likely take on water. She thought she was getting a burial vault and didn't really understand the difference, until it was too late. Crying, she said, "I don't understand why I wasn't told. Seems like it should be their job to tell me, to tell you, to

After learning the difference between a grave box and a burial vault, only 17% chose a grave box

- 57% chose a burial vault
- 26% needed more information before making a decision
- 17% chose a grave box



■ Vault ■ Grave Box ■ Unsure

tell anybody. You're so torn up and nobody explains this to you...I would have put him in a vault." The reporter checked with a number of veterans' organizations and found that they also were not aware that veterans' caskets were being placed inside unprotected liners instead of sealed vaults.

Protection is so important to families that it has been at the heart of lawsuits. In one case, a cemetery in Washington provided a graveliner to a family when the contract used the terminology "interment vault". When it was disinterred after only a few weeks of burial, mud and water were running out and there was significant condensation on the casket. The plaintiff family not only won the lawsuit but in addition the cemetery was forced to contact 70 other families who had similar contracts for interment vaults but had received unlined graveliners, and offer to disinter and replace them with burial vaults.

The integrity of a burial vault is demonstrated time and time again when there is need for a disinterment. Disinterred burial vaults that were properly sealed and buried and that are still within their warranty period (some



another unique attribute of burial vaults over graveliners is that many can be personalized with beautiful imagery, personal photos of family or hobbies, and even used as a landscape for signatures and loving thoughts to be written by family and friends during the committal service. We live in a world where individualism is treasured, as is the commemoration of a life at the graveside service.



as much as 100 years) should be dry on the inside versus graveliners that do not provide protection (see photos). One recent example of a more lighthearted variety was the opening of a burial vault that had been buried for 50 years as a community time capsule - and it was in a town called Peculiar, Missouri! Buried in 1968 as part of the community's 100-year anniversary, the vault was unearthed and opened up. Among the absolutely bone-dry contents were a centennial hat, newspapers, family letters, a Sears & Roebuck catalog, and perhaps most "peculiar", a sealed can containing homemade bread. The confidence that this community placed in the integrity of the burial vault is the same confidence that gives families peace of mind as they contemplate the protection of their loved ones.

Undeniably, there are those for whom protection of their loved one is immaterial for one reason or another. However,

As with any other funeral service options, individual families will decide what matters to them. But they need to be fully informed in order to make knowledgeable decisions, and that responsibility falls to the funeral professional. To help, there are tools that can inform families on outer burial containers which provide consistency, efficiency and thoroughness in the presentation. One of the best tools is video, which has a way of engaging most people as it communicates to both visual and auditory learning styles. Another benefit of video is that you can step away and let it play for a family, providing them some privacy to focus, learn and decide without feeling the pressure of someone hovering over them.

Videos offer another fabulous benefit of ubiquity in that they can be in your selection room, arrangements conference room, laptops or tablets, and even on your website where families can learn in advance of arrangements. Ask your burial vault provider if they have videos that you can use in your presentation, or any other tools that can help you and your staff articulate the whys and options of outer burial containers.

In summary, protection of their loved one is important to many families. Personalization options are also appreciated by many families. When it comes to outer burial containers, most families do not know about them, as confirmed by the above-referenced study. When they are informed, many families would select a burial vault. It is incumbent upon funeral professionals to educate families. **FBA**



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